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# "The House of Life" and "In Memoriam": The Relationship of Death to Love and Art

Cathleen Marie Calvano

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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THE HOUSE OF LIFE AND IN MEMORIAM:  
THE RELATIONSHIP OF DEATH TO LOVE AND ART

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Cathleen M. Calvano

1990

## APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

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Cathleen M. Calvano  
Author

Approved, December 1990

Nathaniel Elliott  
Nathaniel Elliott

Terry Meyers  
Terry Meyers, Chair

Elsa Nettels  
Elsa Nettels

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## ABSTRACT

The years 1832 to 1901 marked a time of transition throughout England. The shift in emphasis from a traditional, rural life to a technological, urban setting resulted in tensions that are captured in the poems examined here. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The House of Life and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's In Memoriam are elegies that spring from, but go beyond, the traditional forms.

Rossetti presents an idyllic, idealized vision of physical love that becomes bleaker as the poet realizes that love provides no escape from death. Natural imagery gives no solace either, for death is an inescapable part of the natural process. The traditional comfort of faith eludes Rossetti—his final vision is dour and without hope.

Tennyson grapples with the same subject matter as Rossetti, and he does so in similar ways. Tennyson, like Rossetti, despairs at the realization that love cannot be perfectly captured and made immortal. Tennyson sees the cruel side of Nature, but he rejects Rossetti's vision: Tennyson's basic faith requires him to believe that Nature is guided by an ultimate plan. He sees this plan as controlled by a deity; therefore, even the seemingly cruel acts of life are encompassed by an overall plan both divine and good.

The two poets pursue parallel examinations of the same topics, and their differing conclusions illustrate both their philosophical differences and the wide variation of opinions found in the literature of the period. This examination is intended to explicate the two works' significant similarities and differences, and to address the reasons behind them.

THE HOUSE OF LIFE AND IN MEMORIAM:

THE RELATIONSHIP OF DEATH TO LOVE AND ART

## **The House of Life and In Memoriam:**

### **The Relationship of Death to Love and Art**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The House of Life (1881) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's In Memoriam (1850), both long elegiac poems, address the fundamental topics of love and death and their relationship to art. In order to come to terms with their own art, each poet must determine his personal vision of love's station in a mortal world. Rossetti and Tennyson follow initially parallel paths to a working definition of the role of love and art in that world. Both poems start as personal narratives in the voice of a speaker eager to explain to the reader the effect a loved one's death has had on him. The philosophically dissimilar poets are driven to different conclusions, however, and in the process they delineate both differing artistic choices and separate, almost opposing, personalities.

Both poems were written during the reign of Queen Victoria (1832-1901), a period that encompassed social, intellectual, and scientific changes that transformed England and the English culture. The House of Life and In Memoriam were written, at least in part, in response to those transitions. Among

the more significant changes experienced by the Victorians were the shift from an agricultural to an industrial society, the growing importance of urban centers as much of the population left rural areas, and scientific and technological advances. The last of these changes had perhaps the most profound effects upon poetry, for this onslaught of technological progress threatened traditional religion's ability to meet the spiritual needs of the intellectual classes and "...many minds which would earlier have found spiritual satisfaction within the doctrines and practices of organized religion were compelled to seek it outside" (Altick, 234).

The House of Life and In Memoriam examine the subjects of life and love and their interaction with death. Both are personal and highly emotional poems, and their disparate conclusions show the latitude of individual viewpoints within Victorian thought. These works point the way for future poetic developments by showing how each poet accommodated such challenges as the theory of evolution and the corresponding weakening of traditional theology into his personal philosophy. The Romantics had placed emphasis on the individual's emotional reaction to the external world, but for Rossetti and Tennyson, this approach has evolved into a focus on a personal philosophical approach to a world changing on all fronts, including those of religion, science and society.

A parallel examination of The House of Life and In Memoriam illustrates how these two Victorian authors utilize the same subject matter and, starting at



similar concepts of love, come to very different conclusions regarding their relationship to love and their art. This comparison may serve to illuminate some of the tensions found in the culture of these poets, tensions which inspired and became part of their work.

Rossetti and Tennyson both question a superficial, sentimental definition of love; that is, neither poet views love as an entirely positive emotion nor sees it as something impervious to death or to the passage of time. Each poet is aware that death may change or destroy love. In The House of Life, Rossetti comes to view death as an all-pervasive, destructive force. Love is weak in death's presence, and thus Rossetti cannot affirm hope for either himself or his poetry's capability to outlive him. For him, mortality is always present and all powerful and he finally can find no consolation in faith. Love's place after death is unknown and uncertain. Tennyson, the more conventionally religious of the two men, articulates in In Memoriam the intense difficulty he has reconciling Arthur Henry Hallam's apparently senseless death with a belief in a divine plan and an omniscient and loving God. In the course of the poem, Tennyson deepens his understanding of love, both human and divine. By the end of the work he sees death as a trial that strengthens love. Both love and poetry will survive as elements in God's eternal plan.

Although love often acts as a catalyst for the writers' poetry, the resulting poem—like the love that inspired it—cannot escape being changed by death. As love changes during the poet's lifetime—the lover grows old or dies, the love fades—the poetry of love also changes. Both poets realize this eventuality and know that the love expressed in poetry, like love itself, is forever subject to changes through reinterpretation (and the differing opinions of readers). The poem may eventually even be lost through time. That a poem is written means nothing—the death of the poet could very well mean the death of his poems.

The House of Life is examined here first because, although it was written later, this poem provides a full portrait of the cycle of life and love from the early stages of infatuation and physical love through those of loss, sorrow, and death. In contrast, In Memoriam begins with the loss of love and despair, and treats as implicit those stages which Rossetti's work describes in detail. The fullness of love comes through the temporal process; this examination will begin with Rossetti's work.

As Brian and Judy Dobbs maintain, The House of Life offers an artistic overview of the poet's life and his theories of poetry, life, and art (221). Yet the poem must not be read as strict autobiography nor should we allow the chronology of individual sonnets to overshadow the published form of the poem. Although Frederick M. Tisdell suggests that "the known facts of the poet's life ought to give

some clue to the interpretation of the sonnets written at a particular period,” such a reading poses the danger of severely limiting the poem (269). It must be remembered that Rossetti is constructing a work of art in his poem; The House of Life does not center on the particulars of Rossetti’s life. While the sequence reflects the poet’s concerns and beliefs, it was not written in direct reaction to specific events, although his own experiences shaped these concerns and beliefs. More valuable is Joan Rees’ observation that Rossetti intended to “put in action...‘a complete dramatic personae of the soul,’” a soul troubled by mortality and the impermanence of poetry (45). According to William E. Fredeman the entire poem acts as a house that contains a life – the life of the poet, although it is not a literal biography (310-311). The House of Life incorporates some specific elements of the poet’s life, but the poem does more than relate particular occurrences. Instead of focusing on the events of the speaker’s life, the poet uses the poem to express his concept of art and its place in that life.

The first fourteen lines in The House of Life sequence present Rossetti’s theory of poetry’s position in a mortal world. Although stated as a definition of a sonnet, this introductory poem reveals Rossetti’s concept of poetry as a whole. The poet’s vision of “A sonnet as a moment’s monument” appears to mean simply that a poem captures something of the time it glorifies or that a poem commemorates a particular occasion (prologue: 1). Paradoxes soon become clear,

however, for the poem—a “Memorial from the Soul’s eternity / To one dead deathless hour”—remains both trapped in and changed by time (prologue: 2-3). Each moment is eternal and therefore deathless, yet a moment passes and is gone, and thus needs a monument so it will be remembered. Similarly, the monument—which glorifies the moment—cannot exist until the moment dies. The monument itself embodies these contradictions: it is simultaneously beautiful and deathly, like the dead yet deathless moment it commemorates. For Fredeman, “moment’s monument” suggests “*movement*, as in momentum, referring to a course of events extending over a prolonged period of time, such as life itself” (310). In his monument to the moment, Rossetti has reflected and sustained the movement of time.

The language of the sonnet is contradictory, mirroring Rossetti’s complicated definition of poetry. Paired opposites—lustral/dire, ivory/ebony, Day/Night—mirror the tension that exists between time and eternity, between death and beauty. Poetry—a moment’s monument—must reflect these complexities, and thus defies simple definition. Poetry embodies the paradoxes described above and takes them further: the poem exists within these limits and simultaneously rises (or attempts to rise) above them. Poetry occupies an unique place—it is part of a period of time, yet because it serves as a monument, it can

survive time and become part of eternity. Poetry, at least at the start of the sequence, has some lasting effect, some significance in regard to time.

As Houston A. Baker notes, Rossetti realizes that not all poetry will survive the test of time. The poet must struggle arduously if he is going to produce a lasting work of art (Baker, 11). “Look that it be, / Whether for lustral rite or dire portent, Of its own arduous fulness reverent”: the poem must be skillfully, even painfully, written (prologue: 3-5). If the poet succeeds, his art may live on in time — “and let Time see / Its flowering crest impearled and orient” (prologue: 7-8) — to affect following generations (Baker, 10).

Almost immediately, however, Rossetti starts to tinker with this concept of poetry. He approaches the essence of poetry from another angle in the first sestet of the sequence. “A sonnet is a coin,” a composite of positive and negative images (prologue: 9). Beauty and wealth are among currency’s associations, as are greed and avarice. Poetry, like money, results from labor, and its cost can be high. Like wealth, poetry endows the artist with a certain power — the power of life and love. Poetry may reveal the soul, often an unpleasant process. But as a coin has two faces, poetry can simultaneously serve dual purposes, and the power of life and love can be inextricably linked to death. A coin also can lose value over time, or be lost itself.

The reference to Charon's toll—"In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death"—reinforces the negative associations of money. The base and grim image of Charon ferrying the dead to Hades, and the morbid comparison of poetry to a coin in Charon's hand, unexpectedly and abruptly recalls the "memorial" in line two (prologue: 14). Death is an inescapable component of poetry for this poet. Although conventionally portrayed as an artifact that will transcend time, and referred to as such by Rossetti earlier in the sequence, poetry for Rossetti remains impermanent. This poet clearly entertains doubts about his art's longevity in the presence of an all-encompassing and unavoidable death.

As is evident from the prologue to the sequence, the prospect of change figures significantly in Rossetti's definition of poetry. For John R. Connors, time unifies the poem and is ever present as an agent of change. Poetry conquers the mutability of time, but only partially since "the moment will flee and those who have experienced it will age and eventually die" (Connors, 23). More ominous than man's mortality, however, is Rossetti's realization that poetry merely preserves the moment—it cannot truly capture the event (Connors, 23). The poet examines time through his poetry, but he cannot ever control time. In this way, poetry is like human memory; through each, the reader can imaginatively relive an aspect of the past (Connors, 30). Like the memory, poetry is imperfect and cannot capture every aspect of an experience. And, just as memories change or weaken

over the years, poetry too can lose its impact. The words of the poem cannot change, of course, but their meaning can alter or be diluted over time. Time destroys the freshness of the poem's message: a pithy message may erode into a sentimental cliché after repeated readings.

For Rossetti, death affects poetry as well as the poet. Time takes its toll on the poet, who will eventually die; time has a similar effect on the poet's work. Despite the poem's title, according to Paul Jarvie and Robert Rosenberg, "death is among the most common words to be found in The House of Life" (115). The poet soundly contradicts the conventional idea that love transcends all, and he juxtaposes images of love with visions of death. Love and the loss (or death) of it result in grief, and this grief inspires the speaker to write poetry. Love and poetry are irrefutably linked through grief.

As the speaker develops his portrait of love within the framework of his portrayal of life, he presents his ideas of the role of poetry and the poet (Baker, 2). The poet goes through a process of re-examination that leads him to what Baker describes as "a less subjective and more realistic view of the external world," that is, the realization that the mortal poet cannot leave a permanent mark through either poetry or love (Baker, 9).

Although the view of love and poetry is darker at the end of the sequence, at no time is the speaker totally optimistic. Even early “positive” depictions of love and life reflect the duality present in the introductory sonnet. “...Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear” interrupts the otherwise tranquil description of “Love Enthroned” (I: 8). At this point in the sequence, a conventional positive belief in everlasting love is depicted along with a reminder that death is omnipresent and that part of the sweetness of life and love may be due to the inevitability of death. The poet does not immediately confound the conventional expectations the reader may bring to the sequence, but rather works gradually. As will be seen, death can be found throughout the work, but it remains in the background for the first half of the poem. Only in “Change and Fate,” the second half of the sequence, does death become a predominant and awesome force. The movement from early optimism to eventual pessimism in the poem mirrors the speaker’s progress in love, for he moves from a naive, youthful vision of both physical and emotional devotion to a bleak conviction that death ruins all.

Rossetti mentions or alludes to death in sonnets II and III. In sonnet IV the speaker presupposes the death of his loved one and imagines life without her: “How then should sound upon Life’s darkening slope / The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope, / The wind of Death’s imperishable wing?” (IV: 12-14). The negative images and vocabulary here foreshadow the tone at the end of the



sequence. The “darkening slope” of life suggests that what follows — death — will not be a cause for celebration. Hope, like life, will perish. The only thing that is imperishable belongs to death — another paradox, in that death itself will never die.

The possible death of a loved one is again foreshadowed in Sonnet XXV, after a long stretch of sonnets illustrating a vital, physical love. This sonnet reflects Rossetti’s fear that a life without love has no meaning and is merely a living death (Dobbs, 221). The images in the octet are not overtly sinister — the speaker awaits his love whose presence reminds him of a bird, and he anticipates lovemaking as one would a bird song. The sestet projects a lonely future when the lover no longer meets the speaker. Death is no peaceful departure, and it does not bring tranquility to the lover left behind. A bird, which conventionally carries such positive connotations as freedom and beauty, is transformed into a gruesome image of death. “The bloodied feathers scattered in the brake” describe a violent death, one that can bring no consolation (XXV: 12). The speaker feels alone and despairing: the lover is “far from me” and there is no suggestion or hope that the speaker will regain the intimacy he once enjoyed (XXV: 13).

Nature, which conventionally might be shown as a consoling entity, brings no relief; it suggests only a void. “Untuneful bough” and “wingless skies” are images of negation that offer no hope (XXV: 14). They merely reinforce the

emptiness of the poet's vision. Nothing replaces the bird or lover, and the speaker here has no hope or promise for the future.

The ramifications of mortality also become apparent in the sequence. Permanence and the possibility of obliterating change concern, and even distress, Rossetti. "Life-in-Love," sonnet XXXVI, describes the death of a beloved, and this description offers a glimpse of Rossetti's view of poetry and its lack of permanence. The poet remembers his first love, but the memory brings no pleasure: "Look on thyself without her, and recall / The waste remembrance and forlorn surmise / That lived but in a dead-drawn breath of sighs / O'er vanished hours and hours eventual" (XXXVI: 5-8). Nothing beautiful remains. Waste, forlorn, dead-drawn, vanished—the octet describes the temporary love in terms which define it as a desolate, purposeless thing. The intensity of emotion the lovers once shared remains only in a lock of hair: "all love hath to show / For heart-beats and for fire-heats long ago" (XXXVI: 10-11). The hair remains "undimmed in death," but all other vestiges of the relationship have dimmed.

A peculiar paradox is apparent in Rossetti's depiction of the relationship between love and death. Death, rather than poetry, contains love and life, for the dead woman embodies the love relationship in a way that the speaker cannot: "Not in thy [the speaker's] body is thy life at all, / But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes" (XXXVI: 1-2). The woman contains the life of a living man, an

apparent contradiction. The love that the speaker harbors will not remain—it will change throughout his life and therefore it cannot be pure. Not so with the dead woman for, like her hair, her love will remain undimmed as the “changeless night” (XXXVI: 13).

“Death-in-Love,” sonnet XLVIII, explicitly deals with this theme. The final line: “I and this Love are one, and I am Death,” reiterates what Rossetti views as the destructive, inevitable intersection of love and death. Although love may lead Rossetti to poetry it surely leads him to visions of death. Poetry cannot transcend death, and has no niche in an uncertain eternity. Rossetti regards the power of his art as limited. He understands that poetry can communicate much of the importance of a moment, but his creative energy cannot bring the moment back (Connors, 23). This inability, this poetic impotence, is parallel to Tennyson’s self description as “An infant crying in the night” (54: 18). For Tennyson, however, the crisis of confidence in his faith and poetry is momentary and will eventually pass; Rossetti feels that his poetry—like love—will eventually die and leave a void, in the way the bird’s death fills the lover with emptiness in sonnet XXV.

“Death-in-Love” asserts that love is one of many parts of life, and that death always follows love and ultimately destroys it. The sestet explicitly echoes the bird imagery of Sonnet XXV. The woman “...plucked a feather from the

bearer's wing"—an image reminiscent of the bloodied feathers in the brake—"And held it to his lips that stirred it not" (XLVIII: 11-12). "Death-in-Love" builds on the images of "Winged Hours" (Sonnet XXV) and turns them bleaker. The earlier sonnet illustrated the sort of danger that is inherent, for Rossetti, in any relationship, and showed the speaker's concern that death would take away his love. The message of "Death-in-Love" is more ominous, for here Rossetti goes further and explicitly links love with death. The "image in Life's retinue / That had Love's wings and bore his gonfalon" is now dead (XLVIII: 1-2). The veiled woman joins the dead image, stating "there is no breath," and thus no hope. At this point, love and death are the same thing (XLVIII: 13).

Death is described in terms of what is *not*—breath is absent, like the "wingless skies" of Sonnet XXV. Rossetti realizes his worst fear: instead of the loved one eventually dying, the loved one becomes (always) part of Death. Thus, love can never be wholly positive or even whole in itself, for death overshadows any pleasure love might bring. This link between the love relationship and Death continues in Rossetti's sonnet sequence. As death's presence ultimately counteracts the positive aspects of love, it also ruins much of poetry's power. Poetry cannot permanently capture an experience because it too is trapped by the implications of death.

By this point in the sequence, Rossetti has relinquished all vestiges of his youthful optimism. His early concept of poetry as a last gift of love has vanished, replaced by a dulling certainty that death overrides love and must therefore negate any of poetry's power. The foreboding of the death of a loved one (in Sonnets IV and XXV) is realized. The joining of love and death, and love and poetry, destroys the poet's power. Rossetti now views love, because of its relationship with death, as a negative force. Thus all things associated with love, including traditionally positive images such as Nature, turn into symbols of darkness and even evil.

Rossetti now views man's short time alive as negative, for death to him does not suggest improvement. Death does not lead to something better nor does it lead to something else: death only marks the end of human experience. There is no sign of evolution—death is a static condition, not a process. The sonnets of the Willowwood section reflect this conviction that death is inevitable and unavoidable. According to William Rossetti, “The four sonnets named “Willowwood” represent in a general sense, the pangs of severance,” a severance that will find no compensation in the next life (Rees, 83). The theme of death dominates this section of the poem, as the poet describes the difficulty of coming to terms with human mortality (Dobbs, 222). Personified Love articulates the despair all in Willowwood feel, despair from the “last hope lost” (LI: 6). No faith

in improvement or evolution exists in Willowwood; all of its inhabitants are hopeless beings. Willowwood's "bitter banks" are filled with many such lovelorn creatures, who would be better forgotten rather than left in this limbo-like place (LI: 9).

The speaker must renounce his love to death, and the future is undefined. There is no conventional or reassuring answer to the question of "whether love can conquer death and survive earthly decay" (Dobbs, 222). Love remains a nebulous concept in the world Rossetti describes: "...and if it [her face] ever may / Meet mine again I know not if Love knows" (LII: 7-8). Doubt dominates this section—the speaker cannot ascertain if love knows his fate, or if a strong love can survive eternity (Dobbs, 222). The speaker also realizes that the relinquishing of loved ones to death is a necessary and inevitable part of the human experience, and his doubt leaves the speaker without confidence.

Sonnet LIV, "Love's Fatality," continues the link between love and death. Love is a "most dread" emotion, and along with Vain-longing it is shackled and bound (LIV: 1). The personification of Love—described as an old, once-proud man—loses vitality and must prepare, albeit against his will, for death. Love has become a helpless hostage, incapable of escape although "once born free" (LIV: 11). The poet loses his ideal conception of love, and is left only with disappointment. Love, once treasured for its physicality, becomes trapped by a

mortal body that grows old and weak. The poet's expectations of love prove false—the old love cowers, thwarted, shackled and tame. The poet, like love, seems cowering and tame, weakened by the realization that love cannot rise above mortality.

In The House of Life, the end of “Youth and Change” marks the last of the reflections of a young poet. The closing sonnet of this section leaves the reader with a final image of optimism through “Love's Last Gift.” This portrays Rossetti's views before final disillusionment sets in, and the poem seems conventional in its imagery. Love enthralls the singer with seductive descriptions of Nature: “The rose-tree and the apple-tree / Have fruits to vaunt or flowers to lure the bee; / And golden shafts are in the feathered sheaf / Of the great harvest-marshal, the year's chief, / Victorious Summer” (LIX: 2-6). The edenic, sensual imagery encompasses the exotic and unknown: “neath warm sea / Strange secret grasses lurk inviolably” (LIX: 6-7). Death does not disturb the scene.

Love bears responsibility for the described beauty: “All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love / To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang” (LIX: 9-10). Love presents itself as the poet's inspiration. This pleasant depiction changes with the next lines: “But Autumn stops to listen, and some pang / From those worse things the wind is moaning of” (LIX: 11-12). Rossetti does not name

the “worse things,” but the reader realizes the inevitability of some change in the idyllic scene. The poet does not dwell on bleakness here, however; we are left with the picture of love giving all to the artist.

“Change and Fate,” the second part of The House of Life, portrays the change in Rossetti’s attitude towards poetry’s relationship to love. Fredeman observes that “while seventeen of the sonnets in Part I have ‘Love’ in the title...none of the sonnets in Part II employs it” (327). As Rossetti continues to search for meaning and to determine the relationships between poetry and art and the poet and society, the sonnets of this section become more removed from youth, and reflect the psyche of an older, more introspective man (Dobbs, 222-23). The vision of sonnet LIX is destroyed.

Sonnet LXI, “The Song-Throe,” portrays a more passive version of the poet. Here Rossetti, as we will see in Tennyson’s work, proposes that the poet is not responsible for his art, but is inspired by a higher force. In this sonnet, that force is Apollo, the demanding god of poetry. Thus Apollo, not love or the poet, is the controlling source of the poem: “The Song-god—He the Sun-god—is no slave / Of thine...” (LXI: 9-10). The poet’s role is submissive, almost masochistic—certainly not pleasurable. As the poet matures he must give up his youthful understanding of his art and acknowledge that poetry is a demanding craft (Baker, 8).



“Michelangelo’s Kiss,” sonnet XCIV, provides further insight into Rossetti’s view of art. For the poet, lasting art provides no real consolation. The sonnet suggests that success may not be what the speaker thought it to be, and he struggles to reconcile his hopes with the reality of his life and art (Dobbs, 223). Regret sets the tone: “What holds for her Death’s garner? And for thee?” (XCIV: 14). The poet asks himself this last question, for he does not know if the poetic role will survive death. Death does not distinguish between artists and the rest of humanity: all face the same end, and art cannot change that (Dobbs, 223). Thus, Rossetti presents poetry as something both beyond the poet’s control and demanding great effort from the poet. Rossetti concentrates on the negative aspects of this arrangement, on poetry’s (and the poet’s) weakness.

We may bring certain expectations to The House of Life’s final sonnet, “The One Hope.” Like the contemporary audience of the poem, we hope for the poet’s final (optimistic) vision of the future. We expect to share in the poet’s vision and to learn through his poem, but Rossetti foils these expectations. A more conventional plot structure would incorporate a crisis and a final resolution, a final moment of climactic doubt and renewed confidence in love’s power over death. An alternative interpretation of the sonnet’s title should be considered. The “one hope” of the sonnet’s title can be read as the *won* hope, giving the reader a false sense of hope. However, the one hope (of God and/or an afterlife)

is not consistent with the views shown in the rest of the sequence. Rossetti undercuts any suggestion of a final consolation, and this one hope is really a *wan* hope. Everything is vain—the poet sees no real hope. Wan hope negates its very existence—hope for this poet is unnatural and without vitality. As will be seen, this is in sharp contrast to Tennyson: Tennyson’s hope is vital to his vision of progress (movement). This vision of negative hope is worse than no hope at all. To know that only “that word alone” will survive indicates a bleak view—a dim reflection of a wan hope (CI: 14).

There will be no final consolation for Rossetti: the poet has told us that “all is vain” (CI: 2). Rossetti’s questions cannot be answered and the one/wan hope provides no relief for his tortured soul. The culmination of his love does not end in an eternal vision; instead, all is obliterated: “Ah! let none other alien spell soe’er / But only the one Hope’s one name be there,— / Not less nor more, but even that word alone” (CI: 12-14). Poetry, art—neither is mentioned as part of the future. Here Rossetti approaches an almost existential reduction of human experience to a brief, irrelevant stimulation of the senses. Nothing remains for Rossetti.

Rossetti cannot rely on trust and faith, for they do not provide the consolation he needs. Rossetti may want to believe that there is some hope, but his wishes are constantly negated by his conviction that death is omnipresent in art

as in life. His wish for hope remains unsupported and Rossetti cannot be swayed by faith alone. Death is eventually all-pervasive for Rossetti, because it is the only certainty. Love is tainted by shadows of death, and the poet can never rise above the despair his realization of mortality brings. This mortality also affects poetry, for “all is vain”; Rossetti makes no exceptions for himself or his poetry (CI: 2).

For Tennyson, as for Rossetti, mortality acts as both catalyst and subject. In Memoriam articulates the intense and conflicting emotions the poet felt upon the death of twenty-two year old Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Tennyson’s love for Hallam is the motivating force behind the poem, for this death forces Tennyson to examine his views of the world around him. The process of grief complicates the poem—the structure reflects the poet’s difficulty in reconciling his religious beliefs with the seemingly random and wasteful death of his friend. Through writing, Tennyson slowly overcomes his intense suffering and experiences what W. David Shaw calls a “psychological catharsis” (66). This cathartic act of artistic composition intermingles love and poetry. In Memoriam illustrates the effect of the death of a loved one on the author; thus, love provides the inspiration and much of the subject matter for the poem.

Tennyson contrasts the artist’s creative process with God’s creation. A poet “works / Without a conscience or an aim,” and does not have a divine plan (34: 7-8). Because the artist and the Divine create through such different

methods—one incapable of knowing, one all-knowing—Tennyson cannot help feeling himself inferior. The poet, unlike the Creator, does not see an all-encompassing plan, but he himself is a part of the divine plan. Both Rossetti and Tennyson accept initial limitations on their ability to define their world through poetry. Tennyson bases these limitations in conventional theology while Rossetti finds his in his own concepts of time and art. The ramifications of these fundamental difference in the two poets' approaches to the same subject matter become much more apparent at the end of each work.

Order is as necessary in the world of poetry as it is in the complicated mortal world, and Tennyson finds the mere possibility of either world's being chaotic or meaningless tremendously threatening. The speaker would choose death over a Godless life of chaos, and thus finds it necessary to believe in God and an overall order. Immortality must exist for Tennyson to find this life meaningful: "...life shall live for evermore, / Else earth is darkness at the core, / And dust and ashes all that is" (34: 3-4).

This hope for an afterlife, tentative and uncertain, continues in Section 35. The lines "...If Death were seen / At first as Death, Love had not been, / Or been in narrowest working shut" suggest a life beyond life on earth (35: 18-20). As Hill suggests in his annotations to the poem, this section implies the existence of immortality, as the poet defines love as more than physicality (Tennyson, 138).

Tennyson sees sensual pleasure as an incomplete representation of love, for love encompasses more subtle and (to the poet as well as his Victorian audience) noble feelings. This definition also devalues the physical in a way that probably would have been unacceptable to Rossetti.

Tennyson addresses the problem of death in relation to his concept of spiritual love. “Thou canst not move me from thy side, / Nor human frailty do me wrong,” the spirit of true love tells the speaker (52: 7-8). The poet’s vision of love—here clearly divorced from the physical—incorporates an unchanging supra-human component. This love will not desert the living left behind after a loved one has died, nor will it be harmed by human shortcomings. The spirit of true love does not recoil from man’s sin. The shortcomings in this life become insignificant when “...thy wealth is gather’d in, / When Time hath sunder’d shell from pearl” (52: 15-16). At this point in the poem, love ultimately triumphs over death.

Tennyson continues, however, to worry about the inevitability of death. He desires to believe in an afterlife, and he articulates his yearning in section 54. Using evolutionary images the poet asserts that life is a process working in a positive way toward a final eternal existence. “O, yet we trust that somehow good / Will be the final goal of ill”: a comforting (if somewhat illogical) philosophy which assumes that even bad occurrences will eventually result in good, and that

all things are therefore positive in any final analysis (54: 1-2). Tennyson visualizes an ultimate plan or organization at work that utilizes *every* creature: “That nothing walks with aimless feet; / That not one life shall be destroy’d, / Or cast as rubbish to the void, / When God hath made the pile complete” (54: 5-8). In the depths of his sorrow, Tennyson cannot reconcile himself to the possibility that Hallam died in vain. Tennyson puts his faith in Christian teachings: he must believe there was a divine reason for Hallam’s death. Without such faith, he would be plunged into despair. The speaker can accept that an overall plan works through evil means, but the idea of a random or malevolent force is repugnant to him. Tennyson’s belief in a divine plan alleviates (at least initially) the feelings of waste and futility that follow the death of such a cherished and talented young man as Hallam.

Ultimately, however, Tennyson realizes he cannot prove his vision. Trust is all he has: “Behold, we know not anything; / I can but trust that good shall fall / At last—far off—at last, to all, / And every winter change to spring” (54: 13-16). Absolute proof is impossible—in this lifetime, the speaker must rely on faith and trust and believe that winter will eventually turn to spring. This cyclical vision is typical of Tennyson’s evolutionary imagery: spring follows winter, much as everything moves toward a final goal. Tennyson’s vision “is not blindly optimistic; the future might be frightening and even destructive,” for the presence of spring is

impermanent (Welch, 177). Although spring returns each year so does winter: winter never truly dies. The journey forward remains important to the poet, however, for motion implies change and the *possibility* of improvement. Improvement is inherent in Tennyson's view, for he believes that a divine plan will have a better world as its ultimate goal.

Like Rossetti, Tennyson abandons the conventional images of Nature. The garden and flowers of Section 43, the innocent earth and sky of Section 45, and the natural revivifying beauty of the pool and eddy in Section 49 culminate in the poet's portrayal of a sinister creative force. This force is neither the edenic garden nor untamed wilderness (both static, impersonal concepts) of tradition. Section 56 of In Memoriam draws heavily on evolutionary theories and the writings of Sir Charles Lyell for its ideas and images of the natural. A personified Nature asserts: "I care for nothing, all shall go" (56: 4). Like Lyell, Tennyson here views the world and Nature as cruel and purposely hostile—indifferent toward, and not protecting of, man (Gliserman, 299). The speaker succumbs to doubt and despair, overwhelmed by this bleak vision: "Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair, / ...Who trusted God was love indeed / And love Creation's final law" may not be immune from Nature's destruction (56: 9, 13-14). Nature deceives. The Creator (who created man and the world of Nature) once *seemed* so fair and loving, but human beings are no more special to Nature than the dinosaurs and countless

other extinct creatures were in their day. Love may not be able to save the species.

Rossetti despairs at the idea of his own death and the possible death or loss of his poetry; Tennyson moves beyond his despair and weakening faith. These doubts become part of Tennyson's cathartic process, incorporated within rather than overwhelming the poet's schema, and they guide the poet toward his eventual view of man's relationship with the world around him (Shaw, 60). Although both Rossetti and Tennyson touch a similar bottom of philosophical despair, Tennyson is able to rise back to a surface of optimism.

Section 118, which again echoes Lyell, emphasizes this sense of the limited time man has on earth. Here Tennyson advocates a vision of forward movement. Man is moving farther and farther forward on the evolutionary scale: "Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die" (118: 27-28). In Tennyson's view of man's evolutionary refinement we repress and eventually rid ourselves of the cruel, animalistic side of our nature ("the beast") to become, presumably, a better, less sensual creature. Lyell's desire to rid readers of "their comfortable human- and ethno-centrism" is clearly echoed here, but Tennyson adds an optimistic twist to the scientist's thinking by his belief in possible improvement (Gliserman, 300). The poet realizes that he has only a limited time on earth, yet does not totally rid himself of faith and an optimism for the future.



Tennyson's view of evolution culminates in an improved, less animalistic human being, with man as "The herald of a higher race" (118: 14). He will not accept the possibility that man may become extinct, despite the logic and evidence of previously mighty species becoming extinct which supports this idea.

Tennyson also refuses to give up hope on love's power. Tennyson applies his philosophical ideas of evolution to his personal loss. The poet can find consolation after Hallam's death, for *he* is able to further Hallam's cause: "...My darken'd ways / Shall ring with music all the same; / To breathe my loss is more than fame, / To utter love more sweet than praise" (77: 13-16). Through his work—however unworthy and inadequate—Tennyson hopes to give Hallam something more than fame. The love that inspires the poet supersedes poetry in importance: love is a better tribute to the memory of Hallam than the fame many hope to achieve through poetry. This notion carries a touch of irony, however, because Tennyson chooses to voice his love of Hallam through poetry. In this sense, Tennyson cannot truly separate love from his art, perhaps because Hallam was also an artist, and would have best appreciated Tennyson's emotion as it was shown through his art.

Even poets (or perhaps, especially poets with their sensitivity to language) cannot always find means of expressing themselves that are completely satisfactory, and Tennyson speaks of an inadequacy of words in the expression of

his love. Poetry is an art, “a product of human emotion given form by the conscious manipulation of language,” and thus is a step removed from the raw experience of emotion (McGhee, 333-34). The unconscious ease and raw quality of human emotion can only be preserved in an art that requires deliberate and unspontaneous laboring. As an art, poetry is secondary to love for Tennyson, because love is an experience that poetry cannot completely capture: “My words are only words” the poet laments (52: 3). Love transcends and goes beyond the problems of words and language.

Tennyson reiterates his frustration as he ponders the question of immortality. Although he often seems close to a positive realization of an afterlife, the poet undercuts that vision: “...but what am I? / An infant crying in the night; / An infant crying for the light, / And with no language but a cry” (54: 17-20). Tennyson can offer no special insights resulting from his position as poet. “What am I?” reduces Tennyson’s vision to a common one—he presents the speaker as no one special or privileged. The inadequacy of his words fuels his frustration: his only language is that of a cry, a senseless animalistic wailing. This “cry” coupled with the speaker’s assertion that he does not have a language suggests regression; here, the speaker appears closer to the bestial end of the evolutionary scale than to the less animalistic, divine end of the scale.

Tennyson's feelings of inadequacy resurface throughout the poem: "And I—my harp would preclude woe— / I cannot all command the strings; / The glory of the sum of things / Will flash along the chords and go" (88: 9-12). Tennyson cannot control everything, not even his artistic ability; therefore he cannot truly voice his feelings. The glory of the love he is trying to describe cannot be adequately defined and tied down forever—it is kinetic and will eventually be gone. Tennyson wants this poem to capture his love, although he knows that a complete and absolute capture is impossible. Love cannot be defined in the necessarily static form of poetry, but the poet must continually reach for this elusive goal.

Frustration with language reappears in section 93: "...hear / The wish too strong for words to name" (93: 13-14). Although this line has some (probably unintended) homoerotic underpinnings, Tennyson clearly experiences dissatisfaction with the language he must use to express himself. There are simply no words to articulate his strong desire to see and touch Hallam again. This frustration with words points to the place they will eventually occupy in Tennyson's vision: subservient to and dwarfed by love. Words, and poetry, are clearly secondary to the poet's actual emotion.

Section 95 states this lack of a sufficient conduit for his emotion more clearly: "Vague words! but ah, how hard to frame / In matter-moulded forms of

speech, / Or even for intellect to reach / Thro' memory that which I became" (95: 45-48). Again, words—and by extension poetry—fall short of describing the speaker's experience. Words are too vague or too restricting—they cannot focus precisely enough on changing emotions. The intellect cannot truly comprehend a non-intellectual experience. This inability to equate the intellectual with the emotional is found again in section 97. The woman tells the personification of love, "I cannot understand; I love'" (97: 36). When love is present, understanding is really not necessary or possible—the love supersedes the need for rationality. Tennyson focuses on the positive thought that art and poetry can be informed and uplifted by love.

Like Rossetti, Tennyson realizes that love must be placed in relation to death. The simple realization of death threatens Tennyson, as does his concept of time. The knowledge that human time is short and we are all mortal, a commonplace theme, can be crushing to the poet whose faith in conventional beliefs has been shaken: "We pass; the path that each man trod / Is dim, or will be dim, with weeds. / What fame is left for human deeds / Is endless age? It rests with God" (73: 9-12). That each man's path will be covered with weeds suggests that all—even the poet and his works—will fade into obscurity and be forgotten. With the poetry, Hallam and Tennyson's love for him will also be forgotten. Only God can determine what, if anything, of human deeds will find lasting fame.

In addition to those worries, Tennyson has fears that there is no hope for his poetry to last: “What hope is here for modern rhyme / To him who turns a musing eye / On songs and deeds, and lives, that lie / Foreshorten’d in the tract of time?” (77: 1-4). The effect of the loss of Hallam is reiterated here. Tennyson views Hallam’s death as more tragic than most deaths, for Hallam was deprived of success during his lifetime, and Tennyson feels he and the world were deprived of the fruit of Hallam’s obvious talents. The death of poetry seems more possible because of Hallam’s death, and Tennyson here shows signs of losing hope. The brevity of human life adds to his fears that poetry may not be remembered for very long, and makes section 77 a comparatively bleak part of the elegy, the lowest point of Tennyson’s progress.

By stanza 128, toward the poem’s end, Tennyson’s views have begun to synthesize: “I see in part / That all, as in some piece of art, / Is toil coöperant to an end” (128: 22-24). As previously discussed, Tennyson feels that there may be a greater plan that takes all into account. Creation is composed of a combination of smaller elements, much as a great work of art is dependent on several factors. Everything—no matter how seemingly small or insignificant—takes part in this process, the end of which the speaker assumes to be good.

Unlike poetry and fame, love, for Tennyson, transcends the physical, sensual element of the beasts. “I shall not lose thee tho’ I die” (130: 16). Love,

even of someone dead, has effects that reach beyond the grave. Love affects the living (perhaps) even more than poetry: “Regret is dead, but love is more / Than in the summers that are flown, / For I myself with these have grown / To something greater than before” (epilogue: 17-20). Love lives long after the regret has passed: the love relationship is continually and vitally alive.

In Memoriam ends on a positive image of “one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves” (epilogue: 143-44). Movement is the opposite of stasis (death): as long as change and movement continue, there is progress in existence. The chaos found at the opening of the poem has been replaced by “the evocation of a new cosmos, a newly felt order of creation predicated upon the active unity of God and Nature” (Bruns, 248). Thus, a poem that ends on this note—people and creation moving toward something—contains an essentially hopeful message. Faith appears to dominate the end of the work, for “*divine event*” suggests the existence of a deity. Although much of In Memoriam contains elements of doubt and the denial of faith, the ultimate view is a positive image of growth through evolution. Herein lies the most profound difference between the two works: Tennyson is able to see some universal unity, a unity that allows hope and a positive view of reality. Rossetti does not share this optimism—for him, the chaos remains unresolved.

For both writers, the possibility of love's eventual death has consequences that affect their basic understanding of art and poetry. Rossetti finds art, like love itself, an ideal to be pursued but one that is inevitably revealed to be empty—neither art nor love gives Rossetti lasting satisfaction, and he finds this impermanence bitterly disappointing. Tennyson suggests that art is secondary to rich human relationships, or at least needs to explore and incorporate such relationships in order to be fully realized. For Rossetti, everything is continually in flux. Change runs throughout his poem, constantly undermining both the reader's and the poet's expectations of a permanent, unchanging spiritual love. Tennyson cannot bring himself to accept such an unordered and unreliable reality. His doubt and angst are eventually overcome, and by the end of In Memoriam his work is ordered and optimistic. Tennyson comes to accept change of a different sort. For Tennyson, change has meaning because each action, in the poet's view, has a place in a divine plan and is therefore not meaningless.

The poets have different philosophies—Tennyson is notably the more religious of the two—and they use those philosophies to examine similar issues in these two poems. The progress of each work describes a different arc. Tennyson may dip down to despair, but his arc rises to confidence in an eternal plan beyond the scope of mortals. While Rossetti's arc may, at its highest, glory in physical love and passion, it must sink to despair by the end of the sequence. The intersections

of these arcs occur during each poet's period of doubt, when he is attempting to forge his own definitions of life, death and love and what they mean to his art.

For both poets, death is an oppressive force. Tennyson escapes total despair by finding solace in the notion that there is "One God, one law, one element, / And one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves" (epilogue: 142-44). God presides over a creation that is moving positively toward a divine—and therefore desirable—event. Rossetti finds no such solace and he undercuts any previous hints of optimism by realizing "all is vain" (CI: 2). The poet sees no hope for an afterlife, and he rejects the possibility of any divine intervention in death. Tennyson must cling to an unprovable belief of positive evolution while Rossetti sees no religious answer, only an overwhelmingly empty vision.



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## VITA

Cathleen Marie Calvano

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, March 18, 1964. Graduated from Phoebus High School in Hampton, Virginia, June 1982 and received a B.A. in English Literature from Beloit College in 1986. Entered the College of William and Mary in September 1986. All course requirements have been completed, but not the thesis: The House of Life and In Memoriam: The Relationship of Death to Love and Art.